**My Father's House**

**by**

**Sharon Mack**

# **Acknowledgments**

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# **Chapter One**

The House That Grief Built

The house on Maple Street looked no different from the others lined up along the block—two-story, white siding, slightly bowed front porch from years of Michigan winters. The shutters needed repainting. The gutters sagged in one corner.

It was a house that held the weight of absence.

Inside, the living room told the story clearly: family photos in mismatched frames covered the mantle, thin with dust. A crocheted blanket—Maria’s, once bright blue—lay draped over the old couch. James Harper hadn’t moved it in three years.

He stood at the kitchen counter that night, sleeves rolled up, trying to scrape burnt rice from the bottom of a pot. The girls would be home soon. At least, two of them. Dee had texted earlier: “Gonna be out late.” No explanation. No surprise.

James sighed and ran a hand through graying hair. He caught his reflection in the microwave door—lines deeper than they had been last fall, eyes heavier. The widower face. A man trying, and too often failing, to be enough for three daughters.

A voice from the stairs startled him.

“Hey, Dad.”

Simone hovered in the doorway, dark hair pulled back, hoodie sleeves covering her thin wrists. Her gaze was half-turned toward the floor.

“Hey, sweetheart. Dinner’s—” James glanced at the pot, lips thinning. “Well, dinner’s a work in progress.”

A faint smile flickered across Simone’s face, there and gone again. She crossed to the table and sat, pulling her notebook close like a shield.

James wiped his hands on a towel, heart aching. How could she look so much like Maria at eighteen—and yet so unreachable? He cleared his throat, voice rough.

“How’s school?”

She flipped a page. “Fine.”

He hated that word. It had become her answer to everything since Maria died. Fine.

“You, uh… you hear back from Michigan State yet?”

Simone’s pen stilled. “Accepted.”

“That’s great.” He forced a brightness he didn’t feel. “You didn’t tell me.”

She shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is. You worked hard.” He wanted to say more—to ask if she was excited, if she was scared, if she needed anything—but the words tangled. How did you talk to a girl who had built walls so high even her father couldn’t climb them?

Just as James opened his mouth again, the front door banged. Raven’s voice rang through the house.

“Dad? Smells like something’s on fire!”

James huffed a laugh. “That’d be your dinner.”

Raven breezed in, track bag slung over her shoulder, ponytail swinging. Sixteen, tall and lean, sharp green eyes that missed nothing. The golden one. The survivor.

She kissed her father’s cheek, wrinkled her nose at the burnt pot, then dropped into the chair beside Simone.

“Homework?” Raven asked, eyeing her sister’s notebook.

“Yeah.”

“Want help?”

“No.”

Raven shot a glance at James, the look that said same as always. He gave a slight nod.

He set out plates—scrambled eggs instead of rice. Not exactly what Maria would’ve served. He’d tried her recipes once, early on. The taste of them had broken him. Now he stuck to simple things, survivable things.

They ate in a silence thick with unspoken words.

Finally, James tried again. “Has anyone heard from Dee today?”

Raven’s fork scraped her plate. “She texted. Out with friends.”

James’s chest tightened. Friends he didn’t know. Places he didn’t trust. His baby—slipping further each week.

“Did she say where?”

“No.”

Simone said nothing.

After dinner, as he washed dishes, James heard Simone retreat upstairs, Raven following after. The house settled into its hollow quiet.

He dried his hands slowly. In the dim kitchen light, the old clock ticked like a heartbeat.

Three years ago, this house had been full of laughter. Maria’s voice in the hall. The girls racing up and down the stairs.

Now the walls seemed to hold their breath.

James leaned on the counter, hands gripping the edge, head bowed.

I’m trying, Maria, he thought. I swear, I’m trying. But I don’t know how to reach them anymore.

Outside, the wind stirred the leaves. The house stood, as it always had.

But it was a house held together by memory. And memory was beginning to crack.

# **Chapter Two**

Simone’s Silence

Simone sat cross-legged on her bed, laptop open, books scattered around her. The glow from the screen cast long shadows on the walls.

Her calculus homework sat untouched. Her acceptance letter from Michigan State blinked on the screen—one click away from reply.

She couldn’t bring herself to answer.

College meant leaving. And she wasn’t sure she had the strength to stay standing, let alone move forward.

The room felt like a tomb. She had kept it unchanged since her mother’s death—Maria’s scarf draped over the chair, perfume bottle still half-full on the dresser. If she changed anything, it would be admitting that life had moved on.

It hadn’t. Not for her.

Simone pulled her knees to her chest, trembling slightly. She hadn’t eaten much again tonight. Food tasted like ash lately. Sleep eluded her most nights.

And always, the voice in her head whispered: You should’ve done more. You should’ve saved her.

A soft knock startled her.

“Simone?”

Her father’s voice. Hesitant. Weary.

She swallowed hard. “Yeah?”

The door creaked open an inch. James’s face, drawn and gray, peered in.

“Just… wanted to say goodnight. You doing okay?”

Simone stared at the screen. “Fine.”

“You sure?”

She forced her voice steady. “Yeah, Dad. Just tired.”

An awkward pause hung in the air.

“Well… okay. Get some rest, sweetheart.”

The door clicked shut again.

Simone pressed her face into her knees, breath shaking.

She wasn’t fine. Not even close.

But telling him—telling anyone—meant uncoiling the grief that had wrapped around her heart like barbed wire. And once it came out, she didn’t know if she could stop it.

Her mother had been the only one she could tell everything to. Now, even surrounded by family, she’d never felt more alone.

# **Chapter Three**

Raven’s Mask

Raven Harper woke before the alarm. She always did.

It wasn’t nerves or anticipation, exactly—just the habit of someone who had learned long ago that life didn’t wait for you to catch up. You either stayed ahead of it, or it swallowed you.

She threw back the quilt and swung her legs out of bed, her bare feet meeting the cool hardwood. Morning light filtered through the blinds, thin and gray, hinting at another cold day.

Down the hall, silence. Her father would already be downstairs, probably nursing his second cup of coffee, pretending he wasn’t running on too little sleep.

Raven padded into the bathroom, washed her face, tied her long black hair into a sleek ponytail. In the mirror, she studied her reflection: clear eyes, straight posture, no cracks. That was the goal. Every day. No cracks.

Mom used to tease her: “You’re my little soldier, Rae. Marching forward, always brave.”

Now there was no one to say those things.

She pulled on jeans, her track jacket, grabbed her backpack. Downstairs, James stood at the kitchen counter, pouring coffee into a travel mug.

“Morning, kiddo,” he said, voice rough.

“Morning.”

She glanced around. No sign of Simone. No sign of Dee, of course.

“You working late tonight?” she asked, grabbing an apple from the counter.

“Should be home for dinner,” James replied. “If I can get this damn report finished.”

Raven gave a tight nod. “I’ll cook.”

He smiled faintly. “Thanks. You’ve been picking up a lot around here.”

“I don’t mind.” It was true. Keeping busy kept her sane.

She slung her bag over her shoulder, then hesitated. “Any word from Dee?”

James’s mouth thinned. “She texted me late. Out with friends again.”

Raven’s heart sank. She should’ve known. Lately, Dee’s texts came later, her lies got thinner. The

signs were there—Raven saw them. The late nights, the glassy eyes, the money missing from James’s wallet. But every time she tried to say something, her father only looked more tired.

And Simone… Simone was too far inside her own head to notice.

“It’s getting worse,” Raven said quietly.

“I know.” James’s voice cracked. “I just… I don’t know how to reach her anymore.”

Raven wanted to say You’re not supposed to do it alone. But the words caught. Because that was the truth of it—he was doing it alone. They all were.

“Try not to worry today,” she said instead, forcing her voice light. “I’ve got it covered.”

James reached out and squeezed her shoulder, his fingers trembling slightly.

“You’re a good kid, Rae.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “See you after school.”

In the car, driving to Lincoln High, Raven forced herself into the right frame of mind—focused, smiling, in control. It was easier around other people. She knew the part by heart: star athlete, honor student, all-around success story.

Because if she let the mask slip—if people saw the cracks—then everything she’d built to keep this family standing might fall apart.

And she couldn’t let that happen. Not now. Not ever.

# **Chapter Four**

Dee’s Spiral

The house was too quiet when Dee Harper slipped out.

She’d waited for the others to leave—Simone to her room, Raven out to school, Dad off to work. The quiet made it easier to move unseen.

She hated the silence. Hated how it pressed in around her, full of everything they didn’t say anymore.

Out on the street, the chill air burned her lungs, but she didn’t care. Her phone buzzed—“Nick’s place. You in?”

She texted back: “Be there in 10.”

The walk to Nick’s was automatic now. Past the park where she used to play. Past the corner store where Mom had bought popsicles in summer. Past all the ghosts of the life that had stopped three years ago.

Nick’s apartment reeked of weed and stale beer. The music was already thumping.

“Harper!” Nick grinned, pulling her inside. “Damn, girl, you look half-dead.”

Dee smirked, flicking her hair over one shoulder. “Didn’t sleep.”

“Cure for that.” He handed her a pill and a bottle of cheap vodka.

She took them without thinking.

The warmth hit her veins fast, the numbness even faster. Around her, people laughed, shouted, danced. She floated through it, untouchable.

This was easier. So much easier than the house.

When she finally stumbled home, sometime past midnight, the sky was heavy with stars, and the cold bit through her jacket. Her head buzzed and spun.

But as she climbed the porch, the front door swung open.

James stood there, backlit by the dim hallway light, face drawn and gray.

“Where the hell have you been?” His voice was sharp, raw with worry and anger.

Dee froze, heart pounding. “Out.”

“It’s almost one in the goddamn morning! You didn’t call, you didn’t answer me—”

“Why do you even care?” The words burst out, brittle and wild. “You don’t even look at me half the time!”

“That’s not true.” His voice dropped, but the pain in it was worse than the shouting. “Dee… I’m here. I’ve always been here. You’re the one pulling away.”

She shoved past him, tears burning her eyes. “Just leave me alone.”

But in her room, door locked, lights out, she curled up on her bed, shaking.

The numbness was wearing off. And underneath it, all she felt was empty.

Here is Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of My Father’s House, written in full prose with a serious tone, building on the growing tension and deepening the emotional undercurrents of the family:

**Chapter Five**

Simone’s Silence

Simone Harper sat at her desk, fingers poised over the keyboard, staring at the screen that refused to blink back at her.

The essay was due tomorrow. Five pages on The Wasteland by T.S. Eliot. It should have been easy—literature was her best subject. But today, her mind wouldn’t cooperate.

The cursor blinked in time with her pulse: too fast, too loud.

From downstairs came the faint noise of Raven cooking—pots clinking, water running. Dad’s voice low on the phone. She should go down, help out, be present, but the thought made her chest tighten.

Instead, she forced herself to type a few words, then stopped. They didn’t make sense. She backspaced, deleting them again.

This wasn’t just writer’s block. It was the familiar weight that had been pressing down on her for months now—years, maybe. A heaviness that wouldn’t lift.

She should talk to someone, but who? Dad had enough on his shoulders. Raven was too busy holding the family together. Dee… Dee was unreachable these days.

And besides, Simone barely knew how to put it into words.

That morning, she’d found herself staring at the bathroom mirror far too long. Her reflection didn’t look like her anymore—pale skin, dark circles under her eyes, hair hanging limp. Her thoughts drifted to darker places more often now. It scared her, though even that fear felt muted.

She heard Raven’s footsteps on the stairs. A soft knock at the door.

“Simone? Dinner’s ready.”

Simone hesitated, swallowed hard. “I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat,” Raven’s voice coaxed. “Come on, just a little.”

But Simone couldn’t bring herself to move.

“I’ll be down later,” she lied. “I just… need to finish this.”

A pause. Then, reluctantly: “Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.”

The footsteps retreated.

Simone exhaled shakily, burying her face in her hands.

What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I just be normal again?

But the silence offered no answers—only the oppressive weight of her own mind, and the blinking cursor waiting on the screen.

# **Chapter Six**

James’s Collapse

The office lights burned long after the others had gone home. James Harper rubbed his eyes, squinting at the spreadsheets on his screen.

The numbers weren’t adding up. Or maybe his brain wasn’t keeping up.

He reached for his coffee—stone cold. His hand trembled slightly as he set it back down.

He’d barely slept the night before. Worry over Dee, Simone, Raven—his girls, drifting further from him. And underneath it all, a gnawing exhaustion he couldn’t seem to shake.

He checked the time—nearly nine. He’d promised he’d be home for dinner.

With a groan, he saved his work and shut down the computer. Standing up, he swayed for a second, a sharp pain lancing through his chest.

“Damn,” he muttered, pressing a hand against his ribs.

The pain ebbed, but left him lightheaded. He gritted his teeth and grabbed his coat. Just tired. Just stress.

The drive home blurred by. The house was mostly dark when he pulled up—only the kitchen light on.

Inside, Raven looked up from the table, a textbook open in front of her.

“You’re late,” she said softly.

“Yeah… lost track of time.” His voice sounded strange to his own ears—thin, rasping.

Raven frowned. “Dad, you don’t lo

“I’m fine. Just tired.” He gave her a weary smile and started toward the stairs.

Halfway there, the room tilted violently. His vision narrowed. The stabbing pain in his chest returned, fiercer now.

“Dad?” Raven’s voice rose, alarmed.

Before he could answer, his legs buckled. He crumpled to the floor, gasping for air.

“Dad!” Raven was at his side, her face pale with panic. “Dad, stay with me! Simone!” she shouted. “Call 911!”

Footsteps pounded upstairs. Simone appeared, wide-eyed, phone in trembling hands.

Raven gripped James’s hand, her own shaking uncontrollably.

“Stay awake, Dad,” she whispered desperately. “Please. Stay with us.”

As the sirens wailed in the distance, the fragile balance of their lives cracked wide open—and nothing would ever be the same again.

# **Chapter Seven**

Fragile Conversations

It was nearly dawn before the doctor came.

A tall man with graying hair and tired eyes, he spoke in the calm, measured tones of someone used to delivering fragile news.

“Your father is stable,” he began. “He was very lucky. The heart attack could’ve been worse, but the stress on his body has been building for some time.”

The sisters listened in tense silence.

“He’s going to need rest, a lot of it. And changes—less stress, better diet, regular check-ups.” The doctor’s gaze softened. “He can’t keep pushing himself the way he has been. His body simply won’t take it.”

Raven’s chest tightened. But that’s all he’s been doing—pushing himself for us, for this family.

“When can we see him?” she asked.

“Later this morning. For now, let him sleep. You girls should rest, too.”

The doctor left them there, alone again.

Dee wiped her face, eyes swollen. “I messed everything up,” she whispered. “I’ve been so selfish.”

Raven looked at her younger sister—really looked this time, past the hard shell Dee wore lately. The circles under her eyes, the hollow cheeks, the tremor in her fingers.

“You’ve been hurting,” Raven said softly. “Just like the rest of us.”

Dee’s lip quivered. “He almost died, Rae. And what have I done these past months? Snuck out. Got high. Lied to him. Lied to both of you.”

Simone spoke then, her voice small. “You’re not the only one.”

Both sisters turned to her. Simone’s eyes glistened. “I’ve been… trapped in my own head. Pretending everything was fine. I didn’t notice how bad things were getting. I didn’t try to help.”

A heavy silence settled between them.

And then Raven spoke, voice thick with unshed tears.

“We’ve all been trying so hard to keep going in our own ways. Dad’s been trying to carry everything alone. And look where it’s gotten us.”

She took a shaky breath. “I can’t do it anymore. We have to start helping each other. Really helping.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Dee reached out slowly, fingers trembling. Simone took her hand, and Raven covered them both with hers.

It wasn’t a solution. It wasn’t forgiveness. But it was a start—fragile, raw, and real.

The first fragile step toward rebuilding what they’d nearly lost.

# **Chapter Eight**

The First Visit

The morning light filtered weakly through the hospital blinds when the nurse finally led them to their father’s room.

Raven’s heart pounded with each step.

James Harper lay propped against crisp white pillows, an oxygen tube in his nose, IV lines in his arm. The monitors beeped steadily, but the sight of him so still, so small in the bed, stole the breath from Raven’s lungs.

“Dad…” she whispered.

His eyes fluttered open, bloodshot but aware. A faint, weary smile touched his lips.

“You girls… you came,” he rasped.

Raven hurried to his side. “Of course we came.”

Simone stood frozen in the doorway, hands clenched at her sides. Dee hovered just behind Raven, face crumpled.

James reached out weakly. “Come here. All of you.”

Slowly, they approached. Raven took his hand. Dee clutched the bed rail. Simone stood at his shoulder, tears slipping silently down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” James whispered. His voice broke. “I should’ve… taken better care of myself. I should’ve seen how much all of you needed me. I failed you girls.”

“Stop,” Raven said quickly, her voice trembling. “You didn’t fail us. We failed you. We’ve all been trying to handle everything alone, and none of us did a very good job.”

James’s gaze shifted to Simone. “You’ve been so quiet, sweetheart. I’ve worried about you.”

Simone swallowed hard. “I… I didn’t know how to ask for help.” Her voice cracked. “I didn’t even know what was wrong with me. I still don’t.”

James squeezed her hand gently. “You’re not alone. We’ll figure it out. Together.”

He turned to Dee. “And you, Dee…”

Tears streamed down her face. “I’ve been a mess, Dad. I’ve been using—stuff. I was angry and scared and I didn’t know how to stop.”

A shadow crossed James’s face, but he didn’t let go of her hand. “You can stop. We’ll help you.”

For a long moment, the only sound was the steady beep of the monitors.

Then James closed his eyes briefly. “No more secrets, girls. No more pretending we’re all okay when we’re not.”

Raven nodded. “No more.”

Simone whispered, “No more.”

Dee’s voice was barely audible. “No more.”

It wasn’t a solution. Not yet. But as they stood there—three daughters and their weary father—it felt like the first breath of something new.

A fragile hope.

**Chapter Nine**

Coming Home

The next two days passed in a blur of tests and doctor consultations. James’s heart was stable, but he would need weeks—months—of recovery.

When he was finally discharged, Raven drove them home. Simone sat in the back seat beside their father, watching him with anxious eyes. Dee stared silently out the window, arms wrapped around herself.

The house felt different when they stepped inside. The familiar worn couch, the kitchen that smelled faintly of last week’s coffee, the old photos on the wall—everything seemed heavier now, touched by what had nearly been lost.

James sank into his armchair with a weary sigh. Raven hovered, adjusting the pillows behind him.

“I can manage, sweetheart,” he said softly.

Raven blinked back tears. “I know. But let us help this time.”

Dee stood awkwardly near the doorway, biting her lip. Finally, she spoke.

“Dad… I need to tell you something.”

He looked up, patient, waiting.

“I want to stop. The drugs, the sneaking out. I want to… try. But I can’t do it alone.”

James’s eyes filled. “You won’t have to.”

Simone sat on the arm of the couch, voice quiet but firm. “We’ll help. All of us.”

Dee looked at her sisters, something shifting in her expression—relief, maybe, or hope.

Raven took a deep breath. “And I need to stop pretending I can fix everything by myself. I’m not Mom. I can’t be.”

“No one expects you to be,” James said gently. “Just be you, Rae. That’s enough.”

For a long moment, none of them spoke. The morning sun slanted through the window, dust motes drifting lazily in the air.

Then James looked at his daughters, pride and pain in his gaze.

“We’ve all been broken,” he said quietly. “But we’re still here. That counts for something.”

Simone’s voice was soft but sure. “It counts for everything.”

And for the first time in years, James Harper and his daughters sat together—not as strangers sharing a house, but as a family.

The road ahead would be long. Healing wouldn’t happen overnight. But for now, in this fragile moment, they had each other.

And that was enough to begin again.

# **Chapter Ten**

Facing the Truth

Days passed.

The rhythm of the house changed—slower, quieter. James spent most of his time in the living room, his strength still fragile. Raven adjusted her school schedule so she could stay home more. Simone moved her laptop downstairs so she could work on schoolwork within earshot of her father. And Dee… Dee kept trying.

It wasn’t easy.

One afternoon, as sunlight slanted through the window, Simone sat across from her father. Her untouched notebook rested in her lap.

James looked at her gently. “You’re not writing.”

Simone hesitated, fingers tightening on the spiral binding. “I… can’t. I can’t focus. I can’t think.” Her voice cracked. “Something’s wrong with me, Dad.”

He leaned forward, wincing slightly. “You’re not broken, Simone. You’re hurting. There’s a difference.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. “It’s more than that. I think… I think I’ve been depressed for a long time. I didn’t know how bad it had gotten. I didn’t know how to tell anyone.”

James’s voice was soft but firm. “Thank you for telling me now.”

Her shoulders shook. “What if I can’t fix it? What if it never gets better?”

James reached out, took her hand. “You don’t have to fix it alone. And you don’t have to stay stuck. We can find help. A good counselor. Maybe a doctor.”

Simone stared at him, the weight in her chest loosening just slightly.

“You mean that?” she whispered.

“With all my heart,” he said. “You don’t have to carry this by yourself anymore.”

For the first time in weeks, Simone felt something stir inside her—not hope exactly, but the faintest glimmer of relief.

In her room upstairs, Dee sat on her bed, scrolling through her phone. Her stomach twisted. She hadn’t used in three days—not since the hospital.

It felt like her skin was crawling. The craving was brutal, her mind whispering how easy it would be to text her old friends, to fall back into the fog.

But Dad was downstairs, weak and recovering. Simone was finally speaking up. Raven had barely left their side.

She couldn’t be the one to shatter what little peace they’d found.

Summoning what courage she had, Dee padded downstairs. Raven was at the kitchen table, sipping tea.

“I need help,” Dee blurted, voice shaking.

Raven set her cup down. “Okay.”

“I mean real help. I can’t stop on my own. The cravings are bad. And I… I’m scared.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t want to screw this up again.”

Raven stood and wrapped her arms around her. “We’ll figure it out. Together. Maybe Dad’s doctor can recommend a program. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Dee clung to her sister, tears soaking Raven’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Raven just held her tighter.

# **Chapter Eleven**

Hard Conversations

That evening, the family gathered in the living room. The house was quiet—no TV, no distractions—just the four of them facing each other.

James’s voice was still weak, but steady.

“I know things have been hard. And I know I’ve been part of the problem—trying to protect you girls instead of trusting you to share the weight.”

Raven shook her head. “You were trying to take care of us.”

“I should’ve let you take care of me, too.” His gaze swept over them. “But now, we do this differently. No more hiding. No more shame.”

Dee swallowed hard. “I want to get clean, Dad. I really do. But it scares me. What if I can’t?”

“You can,” James said firmly. “And we’ll get you the help you need. Not tomorrow—this week.”

Dee’s eyes shone with gratitude.

Simone spoke next, voice trembling. “I want to see a counselor. For the depression. I can’t… pretend anymore.”

James smiled softly. “I’m proud of you.”

Raven’s gaze was steady. “I’ll help get everything set up. For both of you.” She hesitated. “But… I need to say something too.”

They all turned to her.

“I’ve been trying so hard to hold this family together that I forgot how to ask for help myself. I was terrified if I let go, everything would fall apart.”

“It won’t,” James said quietly. “We’ll hold each other up now.”

Raven blinked back tears. “Then that’s what I want. To stop trying to be perfect. To just… be a sister. A daughter.”

James opened his arms as much as he could. “Come here, all of you.”

One by one, they gathered around him—Simone, Raven, Dee—pressing close in a quiet, tearful embrace.

For the first time in years, no walls remained between them.

There was pain ahead, and struggle. But there was also love.

And for this fragile family, that was the beginning of everything.

**Chapter Twelve**

First Steps

By the following Monday, small changes were already taking root in the house.

Raven had spent hours on the phone—first with James’s doctor, then with her school counselor, and finally with a local treatment center.

Now, sitting on the couch beside Dee, she handed her a slip of paper.

“Your intake appointment is Wednesday,” Raven said softly. “It’s outpatient, so you’ll still be home with us. But you’ll have therapy, support groups, the works.”

Dee stared at the paper, fingers trembling. “Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll go.”

James smiled from his chair. “That’s my girl.”

Dee’s eyes filled with tears. “What if I can’t do it?”

“You already are,” Simone said quietly from the doorway. “Just by saying yes.”

Dee wiped her eyes. “Thanks, Sim.”

Simone gave her a small smile—shy, but real.

Later that afternoon, Raven drove Simone to her first counseling session. The car ride was tense; Simone stared out the window, nails digging into her palms.

Raven glanced at her. “You okay?”

“No.” Simone let out a shaky breath. “But… I need this. I know I do.”

When they reached the building, Simone hesitated on the sidewalk, nerves locking her in place.

Raven squeezed her hand. “I’ll be right here when you come out. No pressure. Just one step at a time.”

Simone nodded, her throat tight.

Inside, the counselor—a kind woman named Dr. Patel—welcomed her with warmth and no judgment.

As she sat in the small office, words started to come—halting at first, but soon flowing in a rush:

The emptiness. The constant exhaustion. The way she couldn’t feel joy, even when she wanted to.

The grief over her mother that had never really healed.

And the terrible guilt that she’d failed her father, her sisters.

Dr. Patel listened gently, without interrupting.

By the end of the hour, Simone felt raw, exposed… but lighter.

When she stepped back outside, Raven stood from the car, eyes searching.

Simone gave a tiny nod. “I’m… glad I went.”

Raven’s smile was pure relief. “I’m proud of you, Sim.”

And in that small exchange, the distance between them began to shrink.

# **Chapter Thirteen**

Strength in the Small Things

James watched his daughters moving around the house with a quiet sense of awe.

For the first time in what felt like years, they were talking to each other—really talking.

Raven wasn’t barking orders. Simone wasn’t shutting herself in her room. Dee wasn’t disappearing for hours at a time.

They were still fragile. But they were trying.

One afternoon, while Raven folded laundry, James spoke softly.

“You don’t have to do everything anymore, Rae.”

She looked at him, surprised. “I want to help.”

“You always help,” he said. “But take time for you, too. You’re still a kid, even if you’ve been acting like the mom.”

A lump rose in her throat. “I don’t know how to stop.”

He smiled gently. “Then we’ll figure that out together.”

That evening, Simone sat with Dee in the living room. Dee was fidgety, nerves buzzing in her skin.

“My first meeting’s tomorrow,” Dee whispered. “What if they hate me?”

“They won’t,” Simone said softly. “They’re there because they understand. You don’t have to be perfect.”

Dee looked at her sister, searching. “Why are you being nice to me now?”

Simone’s gaze didn’t waver. “Because I know what it feels like to be stuck. And I don’t want you to go through it alone.”

Dee swallowed hard. “Thanks, Sim.”

It wasn’t a grand moment. There were no soaring speeches, no instant transformations.

But it was honest. Real.

And that, James thought as he listened from his chair, was the truest strength of all.

# **Chapter Fourteen**

First Meeting

Dee sat in the waiting room of the outpatient center, knees bouncing, palms sweating.

The building smelled faintly of antiseptic and coffee. The clock on the wall ticked far too loudly.

Raven had driven her there, now sitting beside her, a steady presence.

“You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to,” Raven murmured. “Just being here is huge.”

Dee nodded, throat tight.

A counselor—a thin, soft-spoken man named Marcus—called her name.

Raven squeezed her hand. “You’ve got this.”

Dee followed Marcus into the meeting room. There were a dozen people in the circle—some older, some barely her age. A few looked worn and hollow. A few looked like anyone else you’d see on the street.

Marcus gave her a warm smile. “Welcome, Dee. We’re glad you’re here.”

She sat, heart pounding, eyes glued to her lap.

Around the circle, people spoke in turn. Small stories of struggle. Slips and relapses. Little victories—a week clean, a month sober.

When it came to her, Dee’s voice shook.

“I… I’m new,” she whispered. “I’ve been using for about a year. Pills, mostly. I didn’t… I didn’t think it was this bad until I almost lost my dad.”

A ripple of quiet understanding passed through the group.

Marcus nodded gently. “Thank you for sharing that. You’re in the right place.”

By the time the hour ended, Dee felt exhausted but strangely lighter. No one had judged her. No one had dismissed her.

When she got back to the car, Raven looked at her, anxious.

“Well?” she asked softly.

Dee let out a shaky breath. “I’m… glad I went. I think I needed to hear that I’m not the only one.”

Raven smiled, relief washing over her. “I’m proud of you.”

For the first time in a long while, Dee believed her.

# **Chapter Fifteen**

Unpacking the Past

Simone sat across from Dr. Patel, a box of tissues on the table between them.

It was her third session. The nerves had lessened, replaced by a different tension—a deep ache she hadn’t yet been able to voice.

Dr. Patel leaned forward gently. “You’ve talked about the depression. About feeling numb. But you haven’t said much about your mom.”

Simone swallowed hard.

“It hurts,” she whispered. “I think… I never really let myself grieve her. I was supposed to be strong. The smart one. Everyone looked to me.”

Tears slipped down her face.

“I felt like if I broke, the whole house would fall apart.”

Dr. Patel nodded softly. “That’s a lot for anyone to carry, especially someone so young.”

Simone’s voice cracked. “I miss her so much. And sometimes… I’m still angry at her. For leaving. For dying.”

The words burst out in a flood—anger, grief, guilt. Things she’d buried so deep they’d eaten away at her from the inside.

Dr. Patel listened patiently.

“You’re allowed to feel all of that,” she said gently. “Anger. Sadness. Even relief, sometimes. Grief is messy, and there’s no right way to do it.”

Simone wiped her face. “I thought I was supposed to be over it by now.”

“No,” Dr. Patel said firmly. “There’s no timeline. And you don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

When Simone left the office that day, she felt drained but clearer. The numbness hadn’t vanished, but the fog had thinned.

That night at home, she sat with her father by the window, both watching the quiet street.

James glanced at her gently. “How was your session today?”

Simone took a breath. “Hard. But good.” She hesitated, then added: “I talked about Mom.”

James’s face softened, pain flickering in his eyes.

“I miss her too, every day,” he whispered.

Simone reached for his hand. For the first time, they shared the grief instead of shouldering it alone.

Outside, the wind stirred the leaves on the trees—soft, steady, a promise of change.

# **Chapter Sixteen**

Shifting Ground

A week passed. Then another.

Dee attended her outpatient sessions three times a week. It wasn’t easy. Some mornings, she woke up shaking, her mind screaming for an escape. But she went.

And each time she returned home, Raven was there—either at the kitchen table with tea or on the porch with her school books—ready to listen if Dee wanted to talk, never pushing.

One night, after a particularly rough session, Dee slumped onto the couch beside Simone.

Simone glanced up from her book. “Hard day?”

Dee nodded, biting her lip. “I wanted to quit halfway through. But Marcus told me relapse doesn’t start with using—it starts with giving up on yourself. I didn’t want to do that.”

Simone gave a small smile. “That’s brave, Dee.”

Dee looked down. “I don’t feel brave. I feel broken.”

Simone set her book aside. “So do I, most of the time.”

Dee blinked in surprise.

“I’m serious,” Simone said softly. “But broken doesn’t mean worthless. It means human.”

Tears pricked Dee’s eyes. “Thanks, Sim.”

They sat in comfortable silence, two sisters quietly learning how to lean on each other.

Meanwhile, Raven was learning to let go—one small choice at a time.

She’d cut back on the over-scheduling. Said no to extra shifts at the coffee shop. Even dropped one of her advanced classes after long talks with her guidance counselor and father.

One afternoon, she found James in the living room, trying to read.

She sat beside him. “I… did something today.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I dropped my AP Chemistry class. I thought you’d be disappointed.”

James chuckled softly. “Rae, why would I be disappointed?”

“I thought I had to be the one who held it all together. Keep everything running. Keep my grades perfect. But I can’t do it all. Not anymore.”

James’s eyes grew gentle. “Raven, you’ve done more for this family than anyone should’ve asked. I’m not disappointed. I’m relieved you’re giving yourself permission to breathe.”

A tear slid down her cheek. “I didn’t know how to stop before. I thought if I let go, things would fall apart.”

He reached for her hand. “We’re stronger now. We can carry this together.”

Raven leaned her head on his shoulder, a quiet peace settling over her for the first time in months.

# **Chapter Seventeen**

New Rhythms

The days began to fall into a new rhythm—fragile but real.

James had regained some of his strength. He could walk around the block now, though slowly, with a cane. The color was returning to his face.

One cool morning, he found himself standing in the kitchen, watching all three daughters move about: Raven making tea, Dee grabbing a banana on her way to therapy, Simone pouring herself a cup of coffee.

The simple scene brought an ache to his chest—not sadness, but gratitude.

This family wasn’t perfect. It was battered, bruised. But it was healing.

“Girls,” he said suddenly.

They looked up.

“I just want to say…” His voice trembled. “I’m proud of you. Of all of you. I know things aren’t easy right now. But I see how hard you’re trying. And I’m grateful.”

Dee flushed. “Thanks, Dad.”

Raven smiled. “We’re proud of you, too.”

Simone set down her cup. “We’re in this together now. For real.”

James nodded, eyes glistening.

That evening, after Dee returned from her group session, the girls cooked dinner together—pasta with jarred sauce, garlic bread slightly burnt.

They ate at the kitchen table, laughter mixing with the clink of forks and the warmth of shared company.

There was still work ahead: more therapy, more healing, more conversations that would stretch their hearts.

But for tonight, the house was full of light.

And James knew: whatever came next, they would face it—together.

# **Chapter Eighteen**

Setback

It happened on a cold Thursday evening.

Dee had been doing well—showing up to meetings, staying clean, helping around the house. But addiction wasn’t a straight road.

That night, after an argument with an old friend over the phone, Dee’s panic rose fast and sharp. The urge to numb it became unbearable.

Without thinking, she slipped out of the house. Walked two blocks. Met someone she shouldn’t have.

An hour later, she stumbled back through the door, pupils wide, trembling.

Raven spotted her first. “Dee?” Her voice cracked. “What did you do?”

Simone appeared in the doorway. “Oh my God…”

Dee crumpled to the floor. “I—I messed up,” she sobbed. “I’m so sorry. I couldn’t stop myself.”

Raven knelt beside her, torn between anger and heartbreak. “Dee, no—why didn’t you call one of us?”

James, who’d heard the commotion, appeared, leaning heavily on his cane. His face was grave but steady.

“Raven, help me get her up.”

Together, they guided Dee to the couch. She buried her face in her hands, shaking with shame.

“I ruined everything,” Dee choked.

“No,” James said firmly. “You had a setback. That doesn’t erase the work you’ve done. What matters is what you do next.”

Simone sat close, voice trembling. “You’re still our sister. We love you. We’ll get through this.”

The hours that followed were long—phone calls to Marcus, urgent counseling session booked for the next day. But in those hours, something changed:

For the first time, Dee didn’t hide her mistake. She let them see her weakness. And they didn’t turn away.

That night, as she fell asleep on the couch, Raven tucked a blanket around her.

“You’re not alone in this, Dee,” she whispered. “Not anymore.”

# **Chapter Nineteen**

The First Words

Simone sat at her desk late one night, the glow of her laptop screen illuminating the room.

It had been months since she’d written anything—not since the depression pulled her under.

But tonight, something stirred. The dam had cracked open in her sessions with Dr. Patel, and words were finally rising to the surface.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Slowly, she began to type:

“My mother’s hands smelled like lavender. She used to tuck me in with a song that only I knew. And when she left, the house became too quiet. Now, piece by piece, we are learning how to sing again.”

Simone stopped, heart racing. It wasn’t much. Just a paragraph.

But it was a beginning.

The next morning at breakfast, James noticed the change in her eyes—brighter, steadier.

“You’re up early,” he remarked.

Simone smiled faintly. “I… wrote something last night.”

Raven looked up. “That’s great, Sim!”

Dee, still fragile but trying, added, “Can we read it sometime?”

Simone’s cheeks flushed. “Maybe. When I’m ready.”

James’s gaze was warm with pride. “No rush. Just know—it matters. Your voice matters.”

Simone blinked back tears. For the first time in a long while, she believed him.

That evening, she printed out the small paragraph and taped it to the wall above her desk: a quiet promise to herself to keep going.

And downstairs, Dee sat with Marcus at her urgent session—owning her relapse, making a plan, refusing to quit.

In their own ways, each member of the family was learning what healing looked like—not perfect, not linear, but real.

And James, watching his daughters from his armchair, knew this house—his house—was becoming a home again.

# **Chapter Twenty**

Learning to Trust

The weeks that followed Dee’s setback were a test for all of them.

Dee committed to her recovery with renewed determination—more meetings, more honesty with Marcus, even reaching out to another girl in her group for support.

But trust—real trust—was harder to rebuild.

One evening, after dinner, Raven caught Dee lingering in the kitchen, nervously picking at a scratch on the table.

Raven crossed her arms. “You okay?”

Dee nodded, then shook her head. “Rae… are you mad at me?”

The question caught Raven off guard. “Mad?”

Dee’s voice cracked. “For relapsing. For screwing up again. For… everything.”

Raven sighed, her shoulders softening. “I was scared. Not mad. Scared we might lose you. Again.”

Tears welled in Dee’s eyes. “I don’t want to be lost. Not anymore.”

Raven stepped forward and hugged her sister tightly. “Then don’t be. You’ve got us now. Let us help you stay here.”

For the first time in months, Dee let herself cry into her sister’s shoulder—not out of shame, but out of fragile hope.

# **Chapter Twenty-One**

Opening the Door

Simone sat on the edge of the couch, her printed page trembling in her hands.

James sat nearby with a blanket over his knees. Dee and Raven flanked the other chairs, expectant but gentle.

“Are you sure?” Raven asked softly. “No pressure.”

Simone took a breath. “I need to try.”

She began to read:

“My mother’s hands smelled like lavender…”

Her voice wavered at first, but grew steadier with each line. The room was silent except for her words—small truths laid bare.

When she finished, she looked up, uncertain.

James’s throat worked. “That was beautiful, Sim.”

Dee nodded, eyes shining. “It made me think of her again… in a good way.”

Raven wiped at her cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

Simone exhaled, her chest lighter than it had felt in years.

James reached for her hand. “Your voice matters. Don’t forget that.”

Later that night, Simone sat at her desk again, the blank screen no longer so frightening.

Downstairs, Raven messaged a friend from her old theater group—tentative, hopeful about joining a small project this spring.

And Dee, curled on the couch with her journal, wrote for the first time in a long while: “I am more than my mistakes.”

In the quiet house, small doors were opening—one by one.

# **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Out Into the World

It was Raven’s idea.

“Dad,” she said one morning, setting down her tea, “I think we should all go out. Together. Just… somewhere.”

James blinked. “Out?”

“Yeah. Not far. Just… out of the house. I think we need it.”

Simone looked up from her notebook. “I wouldn’t mind that.”

Dee glanced between them. “Do you think it’s safe? For you, Dad?”

James smiled faintly. “I’m not ready to run marathons. But I can manage a short trip.” He looked at his daughters—so earnest, so hopeful. “Alright. Let’s do it.”

They decided on the botanical gardens, just across town. The walkways were smooth, the pace could be slow, and the air was fresh.

That Saturday morning, they bundled into the car, James in the passenger seat, Simone at the wheel.

The drive was quiet but full of a kind of nervous anticipation. It had been so long since they’d done something like this—together, by choice.

At the gardens, James moved carefully, cane in hand, while his daughters flanked him protectively.

Raven pointed out flowers. Dee took a few shy photos. Simone breathed in the green scents, notebook tucked under her arm.

At one point, by a bench beneath a willow, James stopped to rest.

As the girls sat with him, he looked at them with a mixture of pride and sorrow.

“You three,” he said softly, “are stronger than I ever gave you credit for.”

Raven frowned. “Dad…”

“No—listen.” He took a breath. “I thought I had to carry everything. I thought… if I didn’t, the family would fall apart. But I see now—you’re each carrying so much. And we’re still here.”

Simone squeezed his hand. Dee rested her head on his shoulder.

For a long moment, beneath the sweeping branches, the Bennett family sat quietly, letting the world turn around them—together.

# **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Small Victories

The trip to the gardens marked a shift—small, subtle, but real.

Simone wrote more frequently now—short pieces, essays, fragments of poetry. With each page, her voice grew clearer.

Dee made it to two months sober. She earned her first milestone chip and came home flushed with pride.

“Two months!” she announced at the dinner table. “Can you believe it?”

Raven grinned. “That’s amazing, Dee.”

James beamed. “We can believe it. We’ve seen how hard you’re working.”

Dee bit her lip, her voice small. “It’s still really hard sometimes.”

“You don’t have to do it alone,” Simone said gently.

Raven reached across the table. “We’re here. Every step.”

And Raven herself—after long talks with her guidance counselor and her father—had applied to a local community college.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to leave home,” she admitted to James one afternoon. “But I want to move forward. Even if it’s slow.”

James squeezed her hand. “Slow is good. Forward is good. I’m proud of you.”

For the first time in many long months, hope began to weave through the walls of My Father’s House—not as a cure for grief or struggle, but as proof that life, even in pieces, could be beautiful again.

# **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Public Words

Simone’s heart pounded as she stood just offstage at the local library.

It had been Raven’s idea. “You should read at the open mic night,” she’d said weeks ago. “Your words deserve to be heard.”

Simone wasn’t so sure. But tonight, here she was—paper trembling in her hands.

The library was modest, the audience small but kind: a circle of folding chairs, a soft-spoken host, a pot of coffee at the back.

James and Raven sat in the front row. Dee hovered near the door, fidgeting but present.

When Simone’s name was called, her legs felt like lead. But she moved.

At the mic, her voice wavered.

“I… I wrote this about my mother,” she began. “And about us.”

She took a breath, then read:

“We live in a house full of shadows and echoes. But there are also windows—cracked, dusty, still letting in light. We gather here, my sisters and I, beneath the weight of old grief, trying to make something new. It is not easy. But we are trying. And sometimes… trying is enough.”

When she finished, the room was still. Then soft applause—genuine, warm.

James wiped his eyes. Raven’s smile shone. Dee’s gaze met hers across the room, filled with something like awe.

Afterward, as they bundled into the car, Simone whispered, “I almost didn’t come.”

James squeezed her hand. “I’m so glad you did.”

**Chapter Twenty-Five**

Temptation

Two days later, Dee faced her own test.

It came in the form of a text from an old friend—an invitation. One she knew she should ignore.

Her fingers hovered over her phone, heart racing.

She paced the room. For a long moment, the pull was unbearable. The thought of slipping, just once—relief, escape—tempted her.

But then she thought of Simone’s reading. Of Raven’s quiet strength. Of her father’s weary, unwavering love.

She picked up her phone and, instead of replying to the friend, she called Marcus.

“I’m not okay,” she blurted when he answered. “I need help. Right now.”

Marcus’s voice was calm. “Good. You called. That’s the first step. Let’s talk.”

An hour later, Dee sat on the porch swing, the phone call behind her, the temptation faded—for now.

James stepped out, leaning on his cane. “You okay?”

Dee nodded, voice rough. “I almost… but I didn’t.”

He sat beside her, slow and careful. “That’s a victory, Dee. Never forget that.”

She leaned into him, letting the cool night air fill her lungs.

They still had a long road ahead. But tonight, she had chosen it—step by fragile step.

# **Chapter Twenty-Six**

First Day

Raven adjusted her backpack on her shoulder for the third time.

“You’re going to be great,” Simone told her, standing by the car.

Dee gave her a quick thumbs up. “Text us after class!”

James, leaning on his cane, smiled warmly. “One small step, Rae. We’re proud of you.”

Raven nodded, trying to hide her nerves. Her first day at the community college—it wasn’t far from home, but it felt like another world.

As she walked into the small campus building, her heart hammered. So many strangers. So many expectations.

She found her seat in the Intro to Literature class. The professor smiled kindly, the students shuffled in.

When the roll was called, Raven’s voice wavered slightly: “Here.”

But she was there. Present. Trying.

By the end of the class, her notes were a little messy, her pulse a little steadier.

When she got home that afternoon, James was waiting at the kitchen table.

“How was it?” he asked.

Raven dropped her bag and smiled, exhausted but proud. “I survived.”

James laughed softly. “That’s more than enough.”

Simone hugged her tightly. “First of many, Rae.”

In the corner, Dee grinned. “Told you you could do it.”

Small victories. Each one mattered.

# **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

Breaking Point

Later that week, James woke feeling worse than he had in months.

Weakness in his legs. Shortness of breath. The lingering effects of his illness, creeping back.

He tried to brush it off—he always did—but Simone noticed.

“Dad. You need to call Dr. Kaplan.”

“I’m fine,” James insisted, though the strain in his voice betrayed him.

Dee, hearing the exchange, chimed in softly, “You’d tell us not to ignore this.”

Raven stepped in, calm but firm. “Dad. Please.”

Finally, reluctantly, James agreed.

Later that afternoon, after the appointment, the truth hit hard: another round of treatment needed, stricter rest required.

James sat in his chair, frustrated and weary. “I hate this,” he muttered. “Being the one who needs help.”

Simone knelt beside him. “Dad… you’ve held us together for years. It’s okay to lean on us now.”

Dee touched his arm. “We want to help. Let us.”

Raven nodded. “We’re stronger together. You taught us that.”

James’s eyes stung. His voice was rough. “You girls… I don’t deserve you.”

Simone shook her head. “You do. And we’re not going anywhere.”

That night, for the first time in a long while, James allowed himself to rest—truly rest—knowing his daughters would hold the house together.

And for the first time in years, the house felt less like a burden, and more like a home.

# **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

A New Balance

The following weeks forced everyone into new routines.

Simone took on more around the house—grocery lists, meal planning, watching over James when the fatigue hit hard.

Raven balanced her coursework and home life, often studying late into the night after making sure her father had eaten and Dee had someone to talk to.

And Dee—still attending meetings, still counting sober days—found herself becoming something she’d never thought she could be: dependable.

One chilly morning, as Simone was folding laundry, Dee appeared in the doorway.

“I can help,” Dee said.

Simone looked up, surprised, then smiled. “Sure.”

They folded in silence for a while before Dee spoke again.

“You think he’s really gonna get better this time?” Her voice was small.

Simone set a towel down carefully. “I think… getting better is different now. Slower. But he’s fighting. And so are we.”

Dee nodded, swallowing hard. “Yeah. I guess we are.”

In that moment, something shifted—an unspoken understanding between them. The weight wasn’t just on their father anymore. They carried it together.

# **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

Together Again

By late spring, James’s strength had begun to return—inch by inch, breath by breath.

There were still limits—he couldn’t drive far, couldn’t stand for long—but the worst of the fatigue had passed.

One Sunday afternoon, with the sun shining warm across the porch, James gathered his daughters outside.

“I’ve been thinking,” he began slowly, “it’s been a long time since your mother’s birthday.”

The girls grew quiet.

James’s voice was steady. “I think… we should do something. Not a big thing. But something. Together.”

Simone nodded. “She’d like that.”

Raven’s throat caught. “Yeah. It’s time.”

Dee looked away, blinking back tears. “We never really… talked about her.”

James reached out, resting a hand on hers. “Maybe we start now.”

And so, on a crisp morning in early May, they packed a small picnic and drove to the park where Marie used to take them when they were little.

They found a quiet spot beneath a broad oak, spread a blanket, and sat.

They talked—of small memories, funny moments, stories long buried in grief.

Simone read aloud from one of her pieces:

“She taught us how to see the good in broken things. We’re still learning that, together.”

Raven wiped her eyes and smiled. “She’d be proud of you, Sim.”

Dee whispered, “Of all of us.”

James looked at his daughters—so different, so strong, so full of life. His voice broke softly:

“She would be proud of us all. And so am I.”

Under the wide blue sky, the four of them sat close, letting love—layered with sorrow, hope, and healing—fill the quiet spaces between them.

They were not whole. But they were together. And that was enough.

# **Chapter Thirty**

Letters in the Drawer

It was Simone who found them—by accident.

She was cleaning out an old drawer in the living room cabinet, sorting through faded receipts and yellowed papers, when her fingers brushed against a bundle of envelopes tied with twine.

Her breath caught. The handwriting was unmistakable—her mother’s.

Quietly, carefully, she untied the bundle and began to read.

They were letters—unsent, written in the final months before Marie’s death. Some addressed to James, some to each daughter. Words of love, of worry, of hope.

Simone’s heart ached with every line.

When James came into the room and saw her sitting there with tear-filled eyes and letters in hand, he stopped.

“I… I couldn’t bring myself to give them to you,” he admitted, voice low. “Not back then. I wasn’t strong enough.”

Simone looked up. “I think… maybe we’re ready now.”

That evening, James gathered the girls in the living room. No TV, no distractions—just them, and the letters.

Hands trembling, James passed each daughter an envelope.

Raven stared at hers, lips pressed tight. Dee clutched hers against her chest. Simone unfolded hers slowly, reverently.

The room was silent except for the rustle of paper and quiet, broken breaths.

When Simone looked up, tears streaming freely, her voice was steady:

“She loved us so much.”

James nodded, eyes wet. “She still does. I feel it. Every day.”

No more words were needed. That night, each of them slept a little closer to their mother’s memory—and to one another.

# **Chapter Thirty-One**

A Conversation Long Delayed

A week later, James asked Raven to take a walk with him.

The weather had warmed, the air was sweet with early summer. They strolled slowly through the neighborhood, James leaning on his cane.

“Rae,” he began, voice unsure, “I need to tell you something.”

She glanced at him. “What is it, Dad?”

They paused beneath an old maple.

James took a breath. “When your mother passed, I… I wasn’t the father you needed. I see that now.”

Raven’s eyes softened.

“I put too much on you,” he continued. “Expected too much. You were just a kid. I’m sorry for that.”

Raven blinked hard. “Dad…”

He pressed on. “I thought if I held it all together, you girls wouldn’t feel the cracks. But… I see now you carried your own burdens. More than I ever should’ve asked of you.”

Raven swallowed the lump in her throat. “You didn’t know what to do. None of us did.”

“I should’ve been there. I should’ve talked to you. Let you be young.”

She touched his arm. “You’re here now. That matters more.”

James’s voice cracked. “Can you forgive me?”

Raven wrapped her arms around him, fiercely.

“I already have, Dad. A long time ago.”

They stood beneath the tree, father and daughter, letting the past drift away on the warm breeze.

And for the first time in years, James felt lighter.

# **Chapter Thirty-Two**

Small Moments, Big Shifts

The house felt different now.

Not perfect—never perfect—but softer somehow. Less like a collection of closed doors, more like a place where light could get in.

One ordinary Tuesday evening, they gathered in the living room after dinner—no occasion, no plan.

Dee sprawled on the couch, flipping through a magazine. Raven curled up in the armchair, laptop open, half-studying, half-daydreaming. Simone sat cross-legged on the floor, notebook in her lap. James watched them all, content, a quiet smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Without looking up, Simone asked softly, “Dad… have you ever thought about writing something? Like… your story?”

James blinked, surprised. “Me?”

“You’ve lived a lot,” Raven chimed in. “And you always have a way with words when you want to.”

Dee glanced up. “I’d read it.”

James chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

But something in the idea sparked—a slow flicker of possibility.

Later that night, after the girls had gone to bed, James sat alone at the kitchen table. He pulled out an old yellow legal pad and stared at the blank page.

Then, tentatively, he began to write.

“This is the story of my house. My girls. My grief. And my hope.”

The pen moved slowly, but it moved.

And in that small act, something else shifted—James making peace with the past, and daring to shape the future.

# **Chapter Thirty-Three**

The Family Meeting

A few weeks later, it was Dee who called for the meeting.

“Family meeting,” she announced, grinning. “Living room. Now.”

James arched a brow. “You sound very official.”

Dee shrugged. “I’ve been working on this speech.”

They gathered—James in his chair, Simone and Raven on the couch, Dee standing in front of them, hands on hips.

“So,” Dee began, “I’ve been thinking. We’ve all changed. We’re… figuring stuff out. But this house—it’s part of that. It’s home. And I think we should do something to make it feel more like ours. Not just Mom’s old place. Not just the place we survived.”

She took a breath. “I’m saying… let’s redo it. Together. Paint the walls. Fix up the garden. Make new memories here.”

There was a pause.

Then Raven smiled. “I love that idea.”

Simone nodded. “It could be good for all of us.”

James looked around at his daughters—so full of life, determination, love.

His throat tightened. “If we’re doing this… it has to be together. Every step.”

Dee grinned. “Deal.”

And just like that, the Bennetts had a new project—not about erasing the past, but about building on it.

Together.

# **Chapter Thirty-Four**

Brushstrokes and Beginnings

Saturday morning dawned clear and bright—perfect for what they had planned.

In the living room, paint cans were stacked high. Drop cloths covered the floors. Simone wore old jeans and a T-shirt. Raven had her hair tied back. Dee bounced from room to room, playlist already blaring from a speaker in the corner.

James sat in his armchair, cane resting against his knee. His voice was warm, proud:

“Look at you three—ready for battle.”

“Artistic battle,” Dee corrected, tossing him a wink. “We’re reclaiming the house.”

Simone handed out brushes. “Alright. Let’s start with the living room. Then the hallway.”

They got to work—first with nervous strokes, then more confident as the morning wore on.

Laughter drifted through the rooms.

Raven discovered an old stain on the wall behind the bookshelf. “Remember when Dee spilled grape juice here? You blamed me.”

Dee gasped, mock scandalized. “You said you’d cover for me!”

James chuckled from his chair. “You both got grounded for a week.”

By midday, the room looked brighter—new colors, fresh energy.

But it wasn’t just the paint.

It was the rhythm they’d found—together, as a family.

# **Chapter Thirty-Five**

In the Garden

Later that afternoon, after sandwiches on the porch, they moved to the backyard.

The garden had been Marie’s pride once. But in the years since her passing, it had gone wild—overgrown, tangled, forgotten.

James stood at the edge of it, cane in hand. His voice was quiet.

“Your mother loved this place. Said it made her feel alive.”

Simone stepped beside him. “We can bring it back.”

Raven pushed up her sleeves. “Let’s do it.”

Dee tugged on a pair of gloves. “I’ll tackle the weeds.”

Together they worked—pulling, digging, pruning. Under the dirt, bulbs waited, old roots still alive.

The sun sank lower, casting long shadows across the yard.

At one point, James sank onto a bench, breath shallow but eyes bright.

“You girls,” he said softly, “you’re making this house a home again.”

Simone smiled, sweat on her brow. “We’re making our home.”

Raven nodded. “And you’re part of it, Dad.”

Dee sat beside him, dirt-smudged but happy. “Always will be.”

The garden wasn’t finished—not yet. But as twilight settled, the Bennetts sat together on the porch, watching the first stars appear.

A house could hold grief. But it could also hold love. And little by little, they were filling it with both.

**Chapter Thirty-Six**

Late-Night Conversations

It was nearly midnight when Simone heard a soft knock on her door.

“Come in,” she called, voice hushed.

The door creaked open and Raven peeked inside. “You awake?”

Simone sat up in bed, setting aside her book. “Yeah. Can’t sleep.”

Raven slipped in, closing the door behind her. She curled up in the old armchair by the window, knees to her chest.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The quiet of the house wrapped around them like a blanket.

Then Raven broke the silence. “I’ve been thinking about Mom a lot lately. More than usual.”

Simone nodded. “Me too. Especially since we started fixing up the house.”

Raven’s voice wavered. “Sometimes I feel guilty. Like… we’re moving on without her.”

Simone’s heart ached. “I don’t think that’s what we’re doing. We’re… carrying her with us. Making room for her memory, not erasing it.”

Raven wiped at her eyes. “I hope so. It just… hurts. Still.”

Simone slid out of bed and sat beside her sister. She wrapped an arm around Raven’s shoulders.

“It’s okay that it hurts. It means she mattered. And it’s okay to keep living, too.”

Raven leaned into her, comforted by the warmth. “You sound so sure.”

“I’m not,” Simone admitted. “But I’m trying to be.”

For the rest of the night, they sat together, two sisters bound by love, loss, and the slow work of healing.

# **Chapter Thirty-Seven**

James’s Letter

One quiet morning, with the girls out at the store, James sat again at the kitchen table, pen in hand.

He’d been writing more lately—memories, reflections, small stories from his life. But this morning, something different stirred in him.

He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper.

To my girls,

If you’re reading this, it means one day I’m no longer there to tell you these words in person.

You’ve given me more pride and love than any man deserves. You’ve taught me what it means to fight, to forgive, and to hope. I know I didn’t always get it right—but I never stopped trying.

This house, this family—it’s yours now. Keep building it with kindness. Remember your mother’s light, and know that mine is with you too.

Love always,

Dad.

He folded the letter carefully and slipped it into an envelope. On the front, he wrote simply:

For Simone, Raven, and Dee.

Then he tucked it away in the drawer beneath the old photograph of Marie.

Some things were too important to leave unsaid.

# **Chapter Thirty-Eight**

New Roots

By late summer, the house looked different.

The living room walls gleamed with new color. The garden had begun to bloom again—vibrant with life, fragrant with lavender and wildflowers.

One afternoon, as they all stood in the yard surveying their work, Simone said softly, “It feels lighter here now. Like we can breathe again.”

James, leaning on his cane, smiled. “You’ve all done that. You brought this house back to life.”

Raven tilted her head. “So what now?”

Dee grinned. “We plant new roots.”

Later that evening, around the dinner table, they talked about what that could mean.

“I’ve been thinking about taking some writing classes,” James admitted. “Nothing fancy. Just… something for me.”

Simone’s eyes lit up. “That’s a great idea.”

“I’m thinking about switching majors,” Raven said, glancing shyly at her father. “I want to do something that matters. Maybe social work.”

James reached for her hand. “I think your heart’s always known that.”

Dee, fiddling with her fork, looked up. “I’ve been… going to meetings again. And therapy. I’m serious this time.”

James’s voice was thick with pride. “I know you are, baby girl.”

There was no grand conclusion that night. Just small, steady promises. New roots, growing beneath the surface.

# **Chapter Thirty-Nine**

The Photo Wall

One crisp autumn morning, Dee came bounding down the stairs.

“I have an idea,” she declared. “For the house. Something we haven’t done yet.”

They gathered in the hallway as Dee explained:

“We need a photo wall. Not just of Mom—but all of us. Our family. Then and now.”

Simone nodded. “I love that.”

Raven smiled. “It’s time.”

They spent the afternoon rummaging through boxes—old photos, faded Polaroids, snapshots of birthdays, graduations, even silly candid moments.

James watched from his chair, eyes misting over. “She’d love this,” he whispered.

They framed the pictures together—choosing spots on the wall, laughing, remembering.

When it was done, they stood back to look.

There was Marie—smiling in the garden. James with a young Simone perched on his shoulders. Raven’s high school dance. Dee’s kindergarten art show. And dozens of moments in between.

A living tapestry. A family, imperfect and healing.

James’s voice was soft. “Now it really feels like home.”

And in that moment, beneath the weight of memory and hope, they all knew: this was no longer just their father’s house.

It was theirs—together.

# **Chapter Forty**

A Quiet Anniversary

The third anniversary of Marie’s passing arrived on a gray, cool day in October. No one mentioned it at first, but the weight of the date hung in the air.

At breakfast, James sipped his coffee, thoughtful. “I was thinking…” he began, voice low. “Maybe today, instead of staying in… we could visit her favorite spot. The lake.”

Simone looked up, surprised but touched. “I’d like that.”

Raven reached across the table. “It would feel right.”

Dee nodded, her voice small. “We can bring flowers.”

And so they went.

The drive was quiet but comfortable, the trees along the road turning amber and gold. At the lake, the wind rippled the water gently.

They stood together near the old dock. Dee set a bouquet of wildflowers at the edge.

James cleared his throat, voice soft but steady. “Marie… I hope you can see these girls. The strength they’ve found. The love they carry.”

Simone’s voice trembled. “We miss you, Mom. Every day.”

Raven added, “But we’re okay. We’re really okay.”

Dee wiped a tear from her cheek. “I hope you’re proud of us.”

They stood there for a long while, letting the wind carry their words.

And though grief remained, it no longer felt like a shadow. It felt like a thread—woven through them, but not binding them.

They left the lake lighter than when they arrived.

# **Chapter Forty-One**

A House Full of Light

Winter crept in, but the house felt warmer than it had in years.

The photo wall grew—new pictures of their projects, small celebrations, shared moments.

James’s writing filled several notebooks now. Simone helped him type up some of the stories, her quiet pride shining through.

Raven applied to programs in social work, nervous but determined.

And Dee—steadily attending meetings, growing stronger every day—began volunteering at a youth center, her own way of giving back.

One snowy evening, the four of them gathered in the living room, a fire crackling in the hearth.

James looked around at his daughters—so different, so brave.

“You know,” he said softly, “when your mother passed… I didn’t think I could do this. I didn’t think I could hold this family together.”

Simone met his gaze. “You didn’t have to do it alone.”

Raven added, “You still don’t.”

Dee leaned her head on his shoulder. “We’re in this together now. Always.”

James smiled, heart full.

Through grief and struggle, they had found something new—not the life they’d once known, but one worth building.

And as laughter filled the room, it was clear: this house—this family—was full of light once more.

# **Chapter Forty-Two**

First Snow

The first heavy snow of the season came one quiet December morning.

Simone stood at the window, watching the flakes drift past the glass, coating the garden in soft white. The sight made her breath catch—not from sadness, but from a strange, growing sense of peace.

James shuffled into the kitchen behind her, cane in hand. “Snow came early this year.”

Simone smiled faintly. “I think the house looks good in winter. Like it’s standing strong.”

He nodded, thoughtful. “It is. We are.”

Later that day, Dee came home from her meeting, cheeks flushed from the cold. She shrugged off her coat, her voice bright.

“They want me to speak at the next group—share my story. I think I’m ready.”

James looked at her with such pride it nearly broke her.

“You are ready, Dee. You’ve come so far.”

Raven arrived next, balancing two bags of groceries. “I’ve got everything for dinner. And maybe… we decorate the tree tonight?”

Simone nodded. “We should. It’s time for new memories.”

That evening, laughter rang through the house as they trimmed the tree together—stringing lights, hanging old ornaments, adding new ones.

James watched his daughters beneath the twinkle of the lights, heart full to the brim.

Grief still lived here. But so did joy. So did love.

And for the first time in years, hope felt stronger than loss.

# **Chapter Forty-Three**

A Letter Shared

Christmas morning came quiet and still. Snow blanketed the yard, and the house was hushed with early light.

James woke earlier than the girls, as always. He sat for a while in the living room, staring at the tree, then rose slowly and went to the drawer beneath the old photo of Marie.

His letter.

With trembling fingers, he unfolded it.

When the girls finally came downstairs—sleepy-eyed and warm in robes and slippers—he called them over.

“I have something for you,” James said softly. “A letter. Wrote it a while back. Wasn’t sure when to share it… but now feels right.”

He handed it to Simone. She opened it, her sisters leaning in. Together, they read his words—the love, the gratitude, the hopes he’d poured onto the page.

By the end, tears glistened in their eyes. Dee hugged him first, fiercely.

“We love you too, Dad. So much.”

Raven wiped at her cheek. “You never had to be perfect

# **Chapter Forty-Four**

Seasons Turning

Spring returned.

In the garden, green shoots pushed through the earth—evidence of a season turning, of life refusing to be stilled.

Simone walked among the beds with her father, helping him tend to the plants. He moved slower now, but with purpose.

“Funny,” James said, kneeling carefully. “How things come back. Year after year.”

Simone smiled. “So do we.”

Inside, Raven had begun her new coursework—balancing books and assignments with her work at the community center. She still doubted herself some days, but there was a steadiness in her now that hadn’t been there before.

And Dee—clear-eyed and grounded—was coming up on one full year sober. The day marked quietly, with a cake and soft hugs. No speeches needed.

That afternoon, James called them all to the living room.

“I’ve been thinking,” he began. “This house… it’s yours now, in more ways than one. I’ve updated the will. Everything here belongs to you three together. You’ll carry it forward.”

“Dad,” Raven said gently, “we’re not going anywhere.”

“I know,” he replied. “But life changes. That’s how it’s meant to be.”

Simone squeezed his hand. “And we’ll face it. Together.”

James looked around the room—walls painted with care, shelves filled with books and framed memories, the light of late afternoon spilling in.

A home. Their home.

# **Chapter Forty-Five**

My Father’s House

One bright morning, not long after, James sat on the porch, a worn notebook in his lap.

He wrote the final line of a story and closed the cover with a soft smile.

Looking out across the garden, he breathed in the scent of earth and lavender. The laughter of his daughters drifted from the kitchen.

He thought of Marie—her laughter, her fierce love—and knew she would be proud.

He rose slowly and stepped inside.

In the hallway, beneath the family photo wall, Simone had hung a small plaque.

“My Father’s House—Est. by Love, Rebuilt by Hope.”

James touched the plaque, a lump rising in his throat.

He didn’t know what the future held. He only knew this:

What they had built here—through grief and struggle, through darkness and light—was stronger than any one of them alone.

A house of memory. A house of hope.

Their house.

Together.

Forever.